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AN ADVENTURE IN DRAMATICS

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The "Little Country Theater" at the New York State Fair in September was sponsored by State Commissioner of Agriculture Charles S. Wilson and undertaken by the Cornell University Dramatic Club as an experimental demonstration to stimulate the use of plays in country communities—by granges, churches, schools, country improvement organizations—as a means of play, education, culture, and "getting together."

The venture was planned to show how comparatively easily good, rather than poor, plays could be presented; how artistic simple staging could be; how adequate an unpretentious building; how effective, simple, and direct acting by amateurs; and how enjoyable and stimulating the whole progress of the production could be made, and how varied the activities involved.

The Cornell Club and its director were called upon because their work was perhaps the best known of similar organizations in the state, they for some five years having maintained an effective "little theater" on the Cornell campus, engaging at times the interest of two hundred to two hundred and fifty undergraduate workers; producing about monthly groups of one-act plays of merit, each production running for two or three consecutive nights. The whole enterprise, acting, managing, scenery design and painting, lighting, carpentry, etc., was in student hands under the guidance of the director. The "Campus Theater" had grown rapidly in popularity and from a small beginning had risen to a major place in Cornell activities. Previous to the organization of the Little Theater the Club had established an enviable reputation for its presentations of great plays by European dramatists—those seldom or never seen on the professional stage in America: Ibsen's *Enemy of the People* and *Pillars of Society*; Gogol's *The Inspector*

General; Jones's *The Rogue's Comedy*; Giacosa's *Like Falling Leaves*; Capus' *L'Aventurier*; Bjornson's *Leonarda*; Sudermann's *Fritzchen*.

The State Fair Commission made available a frame structure, barnlike, bare, whitewashed. A rough stage was erected at one end—rough but of adequate dimensions. Simple benches were available. The club did the rest.

Scenery was designed, built, and painted in Ithaca; properties gathered; lights assembled; rehearsals held, some fifteen volunteers gathering from all parts of the state for the adventure. Two days before the first performance all the "junk" was trucked up overland to Syracuse, and the stage force set to the task of making the bare building a model theater. The stage, of course, centered the whole scheme—the walls went bare. And the stage with garnet proscenium, gray and green scenery, blue-gray curtain, and blue backings, was lovely and artistic—the most artistic thing about the whole fair-grounds, as most agreed.

Beginning with the first morning of the fair we played to three over-full houses daily—some 6,000 folks during the week. We turned that many away, and throughout the day people came and went, looking the "plant" over and questioning. The "auditorium" seated some 300 and "stood" 500. Had strength permitted, the troupe could have played to over-full houses every hour of the day after 11:00 A.M.

The Commission's publicity was good. Tucked away in a far corner of the grounds, nearer the roar of passing freights and shrieking whistles of the New York Central than the entertainment-seeking throngs on the Midway, laboring under various handicaps, we were nevertheless overtaxed with the *interested* folk who came, grangers, county agents, substantial farmers, rural teachers, preachers—and most pleasing of all, lots of plain country folks, sincere, undemonstrative, and earnest (it was one such who pleased the troupe by calling us the "Corneel Dramic Club," as he read our glaring placards). And they liked it, and sent their friends, and came again themselves, and have been writing the director for information ever since! Especially were all workers in any form of rural improvement our earnest supporters and regular attendants.

And little-theater folk, teachers of dramatics, school principals, were most interested.

Part of the project was to demonstrate that *good* plays would be the thing, and that *good* plays were as easy or easier to do than third-rate ones; so we played Zona Gale's *The Neighbors*; Lady Gregory's *The Workhouse Ward*; W. B. Yeats's *The Pot o' Broth*; Sutro's *The Bracelet*. And the people liked them all. Perhaps *The Neighbors* was a bit the favorite, and with our audiences justly. The dramatic director of the enterprise felt that the whole demonstration could push no thesis more strongly than "nothing is too good for the amateur"—to raise the quality of the dramatic activities that always and everywhere will be. Whatever the effect of widespread play-production on the indigenous drama or on encouraging the natively qualified or the rash to write plays, it seems for the near future an entirely secondary consideration to that of raising the general level of present activities, and of encouraging the more general use of high-grade plays as entertainment and as education. Nor does work on plays didactically expository of some technical agricultural problem—however interesting now and then in their right place—seem the sort of thing that should be encouraged. Technical improvement in agricultural method should be inspired by other means. Dramatic activity for the countryside is hardly to be obnoxiously viewed as a form of "uplift," but as a needed entertainment—a constructive pleasure.

And in this the Cornell Dramatic Club's "Little Country Theater" at Syracuse appears to have been most successful. And so the State Fair Commission and so Commissioner Wilson thought, and so also the great number of workers in the various departments of rural improvement work thought. And so the "folks" thought.

The interest and encouragement of many leaders in the dramatic revival were most helpful to the director and to the troupe, and gave it a certain stamp of authority—a good word from Professor G. P. Baker, Percival Chubb, A. J. Arvold, Alexander Woolcott, and others.

It was a strenuous adventure and hard work, and we surely learned more than we taught, but if we helped the cause of the drama in any way, however modest, we are paid for our labor.

In a long interview for the *New York Sun* of October 12, Professor George Pierce Baker, discussing some of the types and latest ventures in "experimental theaters," said: "The most unique experiment of all, however, is that undertaken by Mr. Drummond at Cornell University with his group of actors. . . . The result of Mr. Drummond's work in that community can be well imagined."

But the most substantial and entirely charming thing that developed from the whole adventure was the contribution of Zona Gale, author of *The Neighbors*, which headed the repertoire of the theater:

The use of *The Neighbors* is offered free to any country theater which will use a part of the funds so raised for the following purposes, or will prevail upon some member of the community to carry out the following:

To plant at least one long-lived shade tree in the community; or,

To plant a fruit tree by the roadside; or,

To plant a spruce or balsam to be used, when so desired, as a community Christmas tree.

One tree for every performance of the play!

And if the producers wish to give really good measure for the use of the play, it is recommended that they conclude the evening with a community gathering, with community singing and dancing, and a discussion of the things which their community needs.

Furthermore, it is understood that the producers, the caste, and the audience at such a performance shall all be neighbors to everyone, as long as they live.

If only many could write such a play and give it with such a grace to the cause!

The Department of Rural Sociology co-operating with the Extension Department of the State College of Agriculture at Cornell hopes to issue a little pamphlet descriptive of the "Little Country Theater," with cuts, etc., for those who might be interested in having a record of the enterprise.

At any rate, here was a success. Should it not be tried elsewhere? If every state had its "experimental little country theater" at its state fair, what might not be the result, especially were the movement followed up by the distribution of proper aids.

For those who may attempt elsewhere the experiment, the Cornell Dramatic Club can say, "hard work, good luck, and success!"